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ABSTRACT

For teachers of speech-oriented basic writers, the choices of what to teach--and what to count as learning--ought to be guided by those requirements of academic culture that are indispensable for basic writers to know, specifically the use of written language, a discourse specialized in both form and function and differing substantially from speech. Basic writing teachers must orient their very oral students not only to the conventional and formulaic language of written text but also to a way of thinking and sounding of the particular linguistic and rhetorical context which is the University. Examples from student-written essays illustrate the prerequisite writing and thinking skills needed for entry into higher education and the best ways to teach those skills. (Eighteen references are attached.) (RS)

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BASIC WRITING INSTRUCTION: WHAT COUNTS AS LEARNING?

Martin M. McKoski

> If he fails to develop any sense of what I shall call reflective intervention in the knowledge he encounters, the young person will be operating continually from the outside in -- knowledge will control and guide him . . . . if he can negotiate the result of his penetrations [of knowledge], then he becomes a member of the culture-creating community.
>
> Jerome Bruner, Actual Minds, Possible Worlds (129)

Language serves many functions, pursues many aims. Schooling, however, as cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner eloquently and persistently argues, cultivates a particular use of language, "the use of language outside the context of action." This, for Bruner, is schooling's chief effect and contribution ("Language" 63). The language of schooling, especially written language, by its very separation from immediate dialogue and situational context, uniquely encourages "a rise in self consciousness" (Relevance 48) and "that form of reckoning that is conducive to reflectiveness" (12). Indeed, the use of language out of the context of action transforms the

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very nature of thought processes; or to put it in Bruner's words,

> the separation of word and thing demands a notion that words are in people's heads and not in their referents. The concepts of "thinker" and "thought processes" thus become important in the shedding of nominal realism. Meaning is seen to vary . . ., and the notion of psychological relativity is born. Implicit in this notion is the distinction of oneself and one's point of view (49).

Through the process of decontextualization, he would add, the way is open for Piaget's stage of formal operations.

The implications of Bruner's thought for writing instruction are clear: the chief aim of school-sponsored writing is to help individual writers become self-consciously reflective about what they are doing and the way in which they are perceiving and conceptualizing, "aware of having a particular slant on things, a certain individuality" (49). Again, it is not just language use itself that makes a difference but a particular use or function of it that affects the use of mind: "It is this that permits one to reach higher ground, this process of objectifying in language what one has thought and then turning around on it and reconsidering it" (Actual Minds 129). My assumption is that this is what is meant by our saying that language, especially written language, is a powerful instrument or tool of thought, a "device for

ordering thoughts about things and thoughts about thoughts" (Toward 112).

David Bartholomae, noted researcher on basic writing, more recently made a similar claim for a specialized use of language, which I believe may be interpreted, in part at least, as the use of language in a self-consciously reflective way. Movement toward college-level writing (Bartholomae's "specialized discourse" of the academy) begins when a student's writing goes beyond the "articulation of the commonplace" (149), when it tells more than just a story, when the student "can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the 'common' code but his or her own" (156). In writing a paper, the college-level writer, unlike the beginning or basic writer, is "consistently and dramatically conscious of herself forming something to say out of what has been said and out of what she has been saying" (154), nearly "as a person at a remove from that experience interpreting it" (149). She is, in other words, self-consciously reflective about how she perceives and how the frameworks she uses affect what she sees. Or put another way, in the language of the developmentalists, she adopts in her writing a persona or perspective that goes beyond the concrete, egocentric use of language limited to matters of fact to an increasingly abstract, general and relative reasoning.

The point of view behind this discussion is that as teachers of speech-oriented basic writers, the choices of what to teach--and what to count as learning--ought to be guided by those requirements of academic culture that are indispensable

for our students to know, specifically its use of language, a language specialized in both form and function and differing substantially from speech. We must, that is, orient our very oral students not only to the conventional and formulaic language of written text but also to a way of thinking and sounding--some of the habits of mind--of the particular linguistic and rhetorical context which is the University. A number of advocates of "new rhetoric," such as David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, Mike Rose, all of whom write on basic writers, have been arguing from just such a position. But unlike them, in what I perceive is their advocacy of a nearly slavish imitation, I am not suggesting that we pre-empt our students' growth in individual expression or their individual voices--in short, their autonomy. Socialization of the sort I have in mind may be seen, rather, as beginning with or coming out of the student's own language and experience: If new knowledge is not constructed by the individual himself but is simply a mental copy of what is experienced, it remains imperfectly understood.

The purpose of the remainder of this paper will be to examine through the use of essays done by beginning college-level basic writers those pre-requisite writing and thinking skills needed for entry into higher education and, then, to some extent, how best to teach them. While the primary focus of this paper is on "a way of thinking," my examination begins with what is truly most basic, learning the conventions of written language and producing a self-sufficient text. It is

for this that students elect or are required to take Basic Writing; and it is this that initiates for speech-oriented students the sequence of development that leads to competency and, finally, effectiveness in writing.

The Structures of Speech and Writing

Research has made clear that writing and speech differ markedly at the sentence and text levels (Chafe, Kress, Kroll & Vann, Olson). Such was the basis of an article a colleague and I wrote about the conventional language of writing that basic writers must develop and make habitual in order to produce writing to be read--skills that for speech-oriented students constitute, in our experience, the turning point on which further instruction and development in writing occur. Written sentences and texts are both marked by greater explicitness and elaboration, involve a different kind of order--hierarchical rather than sequential--and new ways of relating to an audience. Our developmental model proposed the elimination of everything in class except the actual practice of these essentials that differentiate writing from speech. One of the major premises was that there is a limit to what beginning writers can assimilate, and so they should not be overwhelmed with what we regard as secondary elements (e.g., pronoun reference, standard usages) that can be learned later in the developmental process. We argued that what is primary in learning to write, what must become automatic, is the

composition of written sentences (the ability to embed propositions using the syntactic devices of the language) and texts that are focused and explicit. These comprise the most basic of conventions and constitute the transition from basic to competent writing.

With beginning writers who are learning to write, we ought to expect their early writing to show many of the features of the grammar of speech. Such is the case with the following which is, I think, typical of papers of inexperienced writers. Unfamiliar with the necessity of satisfying a reader, this entering student writer relied on that which was familiar, the spoken mode:

> The trip that Im going to tell you about is the trip my 2 friends & I went on to ashland college. A friend of mine stays and goes to school ~~thier~~ there. She invited us up for the weekend. I've never been there and I was very excited!
>
> My 2 friends and I started off the trip it wasn't a very long trip just about 1 hour. I thought I was going to get lost about 10 times, but I did pretty good for being the first time there. So we got there in about 2 hours, the college isn't that big so we had problems finding my friend, by the way her name is Jamie. So we found Jamie's room, in her dorm. But when we got their she wasn't there, she had a note on her door that said "I'm out on the quad, and I'm wearing blue and purple" well we had never been there and we just looked at each other, and said "What hell is a quad". We all walked outside looking for a quad, well after about 10 minutes we found the quad, there must of been 700 people their and we're suppose to look for Jamie in purple & blue, sure. Well after a while of hard searching we finally found her. I asked why there were so many people here and why there was a band playing, she said it was Mayday weekend and she had alot of stuff planned for us to do. Well we were all tired so we went back to her room, changed our clothes & ate, the around 8 o'clock, we went to all her friends parties, most of them were fraternaty partys, and I have never been to any and I had a pretty good time, I drove jamie a little nuts, but

> we had a pretty good time. We all got back to her about 4:00 AM; at least I did I lost everyone about 3:00 AM, I was wandering looking for them about 1 hr.
>
> We were real tired the next morning but we got about 11 in the morning, we were very tired, but we got up and left. All in all it wasn't that bad of a trip.

In written discourse the writer must develop a self-sufficient context, whereas, in spoken discourse, the speaker creates the context mutually, implicitly, and personally with the listener. The "Ashland College" narrative more nearly resembles a transcription of a rapid one-sided conversation instead of an essay developing the topic, "A Significant Trip I Have Taken."

Although the writer explicitly states her topic--"The trip that I am going to tell you about is the trip my 2 friends & I went on to ashland college"--the focus or significance retains the implicitness of speech, where the speaker and listener are assumed to share the same common knowledge. Just as a speaker amends his message in conversation, so does this writer of the essay. Meandering along a chronologically narrated trip, the writer regresses to add information about her friend: "by the way her name is Jamie"; digresses to offer "insight": "...it wasn't a long trip just about 1 hour. I thought I was going to get lost about 10 times"; pauses to reflect on a moment: "...'What the hell is a quad,'"; and rephrases to clarify a point: "...we went to all her friends parties, most of them were fraternaty partys." Sometimes the writer contradicts her facts and without further explanation continues on her clausal course: "...it wasn't a very long

trip just about 1 hour...but I did pretty good for being the first time there...we got there in about 2 hours." Attempts to use specific detail, as writing demands, take the form of "insignificant" time units: "...about 1 hour"; "...about 2 hours..."; "...around 8 o'clock...." The writer's descriptions lack specificity and elaboration: "...she had alot of stuff planned"; "...after a while a hard searching..."; "I had a pretty good time."

The text is divided into three paragraphs which correspond to the written convention of introduction, body, and conclusion; and the writer does use relative and subordinate clauses, which are characteristic of writing, but the majority of syntactic structures are the conventions of speech. The writer depends upon conjoining: "...we had never been there and we just looked at each other...," and adjoining: "...we got about 11 in the morning, we were very tired." The transitions used to show relationships between thoughts are those typically found in speech: "So we got..."; "Well after a while...." Many of the sentences contain forms of "written" speech and the repetition which is characteristic of speech.

The fact is that very few characteristics of writing appear in this essay. The writer relies upon her knowledge of contextual and syntactic structures of speech to produce a sequential ordering of events. The informality, clausal chaining, implicitness, and repetition are more characteristic of speech than of writing. It is in the course of "learning to write" that she will encounter the other sense in which we use the term writing, and that is, as the composing of ideas, as

thinking. That she did not take advantage of this second sense of writing is clear from her data-driven prose.

Reflective Thought

Another practice of academic discourse has to do with the thought content of a piece of writing, which, for the sake of convenience, I will call stage two learning. I referred earlier to this quality and intellectual capacity demonstrated in thoughtful academic speaking and writing as--taking my cue from Bruner--self-conscious reflectiveness. It may just as usefully be referred to as self-awareness or open-mindedness, even empowerment (meaning to possess oneself through language), and its expression in written discourse is ultimately what constitutes the transition from competent to effective writing. I believe it involves the ability, willingness even, to reconsider what one has written; to think about implications; to see oneself and one's beliefs as relative or, at least, in process; to be open to other or alternate points of view; to distance oneself from one's usual, preferred ways of "seeing," critically as a reader would--all self-analytic habits of mind. Cognitivists might call it metacognition. Conscious reflection in writing might very well be what we mean by voice. At any rate, it is speculative and exploratory in nature and cognizant of the complexity of any issue. It expresses stance and invites counter-stance. It is the educated self.

This next paper is the product of a basic writer who was one among twenty-two prize-winners in a national essay contest for basic writers held in 1986 by Scott, Foresman (The twenty-two prize-winning essays are published in Developing Writers: Prize-winning Essays.). The essay, "Abandoned Friendship," by Jesus De La Cruz, a basic writer from the University of California, Davis, superbly demonstrates some of "the habits of mind" collectively referred to as self-conscious reflectiveness. Since his essay is lengthy, I will reproduce only the initial and final two paragraphs of Jesus' narrative.

ABANDONED FRIENDSHIP

> Reflecting back at my childhood years, I can pinpoint experiences that have, through time, led me to a meaningful discovery of who I am. From an endless catalogue of these childhood experiences, my fondest memory, which so frequently comes to mind, is my relationship with Daniel. When I was four years old, my family came to reside in Whittier, California. The previous month had been very difficult, for my family had just completed a nerve-wracking and tiresome illegal immigration from Northern Mexico to sunny California. There were but a few Hispanic families residing in our residential area; luckily, a Hispanic family resided only two houses up our avenue. My sisters and I quickly became acquainted with the children of this family, enabling me, for the first time, to meet Daniel. Daniel was a normal Mexican-American child; physically, he had an adolescent body with its pot belly, undeveloped muscles and immature facial features. From our first encounter we would have never been able to comprehend the tremendous odyssey we would embark on, for our similarities would draw us closer together during our adolescent years. But our differences would ultimately force us to abandon our friendship.
>
> * * * * * * * * * * *
>
> Daniel was sucked up into his social environment which eventually drove him to drop out of high school, and then he simply disappeared from sight. I was briefly reacquainted with him during a

party after some years of not knowing his whereabouts. My friends and I were sitting on a curb drinking beer and listening to music when I saw Daniel walking up the street. Physically he had matured: he didn't have his pot belly, his shoulders were wider, and his facial features somehow had deteriorated since I last saw him. As he came closer, I noticed he was wearing baggy pants and that his hair was greased and combed straight back. At this time, one of my friends spotted him and stood up to greet him. My heart stopped, for I did not know what to expect. I looked at him while he was greeting my friends and noticed he was under the influence of drugs. I could tell he was ignoring me, for he dreaded the moment he would have to greet me. He greeted my friends with a Cholo style handshake; I could never remember how those handshakes worked. Now, I was the only one he had to greet. I could not face him as I used to in my adolescent years, so I stretched out my hand and forced myself to look at him. He didn't want to make eye contact, so he quickly tilted his head down. I was expecting a Cholo handshake, but instead I felt a firm grip. I immediately felt a surge of energy flow through us, overwhelming both of us, forcing us to break apart. Without exchanging any words, we both had a glimpse into each other's feelings. What I saw was a friend, very distant and chained to his environment and its expectations.

Reflecting back on my relationship with Daniel, I wonder if we could have somehow overcome our differences and stayed friends. I wish we could have, for then I would have been an extension of him, with the ability to have some insight into who he was and how he interpreted our experiences. I find myself asking why our relationship was abandoned. Maybe our similarities were not strong enough and our differences separated us far enough, so that we wanted to forget that we were once friends. Or did I mature too fast, leaving him behind with disillusionment and not wanting to catch up? One thing I am sure of, and that is I want to talk to him. Maybe someday? (118, 120-121)

"Abandoned Friendship" is, to say the least, remarkable writing, and for a number of reasons. But I believe it distinguishes itself principally by its conscious reflectivity. Jesus presents his writerly self as a mind deeply engaged in the very act of thinking although, I am sure,

the essay is rather an exploration of the results of that thinking since it is a retrospective analysis. At any rate, here is the thoughtful, distanced perspective--or persona--able and willing to break up his consciousness and strive to see in a new way, to re-conceptualize. By acknowledging the possibility of worlds, or varied stances and perspectives, he invites reflection and thereby the reader's interest and willingness to learn: "I wonder if we could have somehow overcome our differences and stayed friends. . . .for then I would have been an extension of him, with the ability to have some insight into who he was and how he interpreted our experiences." Doubtless, it reflects the academic mental framework par excellence.

The following paper demonstrates the sort of progress a more typical basic writer can make given a curriculum that focuses on the requisite writing and thinking skills of college-level writing I have proposed. Here literacy and empowerment evolve simultaneously:

> When I was about eight years old, I had an experience with prejudice that for years affected, in a negative way, my feelings about my American Indian heritage and American Indians in general. At the time of this incident, I lived in the middle class suburb of Ogden, Utah. Though I don't remember the reason, I do remember being chased and finally cornered in the garage of my family's house by a group of four or five boys from the neighborhood I lived in. The oldest of the kids, David Lockwood, was the leader of the group. In a calm and cold voice he ridiculed me because of my Indian heritage. Everything he said was calculated to make me cry; however, I was not going to give him the satisfaction. I can't recall what he said to me, but I do remember the tension and sense of anticipation in the air. I was literally against the wall with Lockwood, who was about thirteen years old, very tall, and very white, standing directly in front of

> me, and the rest of the boys, who were around my age, standing in a semi-circle behind him. They were waiting for me to cry, or fight. To further humiliate me, Lockwood knelt in front of me, wetted his index finger on his tongue, and began applying "war paint" to my face. The saliva on his fingertip made lines on my face by removing the dirt which had accumulated from a full day of playing outside, thus achieving the war paint effect. Though I wanted to do both, I neither cried nor fought. Fear prevented me. I remember feeling hatred for David Lockwood, but there was a deeper hurt that made me feel very lonely inside. A feeling I carried with me for years. I think that incident caused me to believe that because of the Indian blood in my veins, I was inferior to people of other races, especially Caucasians. I became ashamed of my ancestry. This shame eventually turned into a hatred for Indians. It was a strange paradox; even though I am half Indian, I was prejudiced against them. I thought that they were ridiculous. They had let the white settlers take everything from them. They were pushed onto reservations (or were they led?) to live in poverty and drown in "firewater." The "Noble-Savage," whose vocabulary consisted of "ugh," had caused me a tremendous amount of embarrassment and confusion about myself. After years of soul searching, I have overcome my feelings of inferiority, and my hatred of Indians, but it has taken twenty of the twenty-nine years I've been alive to do it. That experience with David Lockwood, which to most people might seem trivial, sparked a feeling of doubt about myself which I fanned into a fire of hatred that condemned an entire race of people.

In the case of college students, both by age and experience, conscious reflection is a thinking skill they to some extent already possess; or, at any rate, it is not on a level much beyond their range and so can figure into our instruction. And writing, since it leaves a permanent trace, would seem uniquely to permit, even nurture, the revising, reflecting, and perspective-taking we as teachers want to maximize. Our task is to provide the scaffolding for the student to climb on and provisional hypotheses the student can use: "Instruction is," insists Bruner, "an effort to assist or

to shape growth" (Toward 1). For him, development does not consist of a lone person building a model of the external world.

What kinds of intervention might induce our hesitant beginning writers to apply this ability in their writing? How might we assist and foster this emphasis on, let's say, the more abstract rather than the less abstract?

The most adequate method, I believe, for promoting conscious reflection (and abstract and relative reasoning) is dialectic in the form of dialogue--the process by which interaction promotes the growth of thought--and/or topics or curricula that induce disturbance, conflict, opposition, that break up or break through our favored ways of "seeing" (Coles, Elbow, Shor). Situating students in cognitive conflict to encourage the sort of growth I refer to as stage two learning comes after our developing writers manage some success with the conventions associated with learning to write; after, that is, they have gained at least a modicum of confidence and are thereby psychologically ready to open up to the demands and consequences of the dialectical process.

According to James Moffett, the process of composing can by itself "surprise our habitual thought patterns" and modify inner speech--our same old train of thought--and lead to new ideas, new understanding, or at least subject inner speech to new conditions. By assuming the position of reader through his group work and multiple drafting, the student may gain the necessary distance to see and to reflect. Yet, as Marlene Scardamalia and Carl Bereiter's research concludes, "the deepening of reflective thought is not an automatic consequence

of experience in writing." Their experiments do suggest, however, that "nature can be assisted in developing the processes that lead to reflection." (327) Specifically, they rely on intervention through cues in the form of sentence openers or "assisted monologues" that the student then incorporates into his oral planning so as to encourage "reflection, reconsideration, and self-criticism." (321)

Writing as process can make writing more manageable, especially for beginners, but it alone cannot guarantee reflective thought. What seems to make a difference to the success of the process, then, is the responsive intervention and adjustive feedback that go along with it, such as dialogue in the sense of replaying the student's ideas back to him ("I heard you say . . . .") or, more important, the use of conflict through dialogue--dialectic--to help free someone from a fixed or single point of view. In fact, for Scardamalia and Bereiter, dialectic is such a potent force that without a dialectical process involved in the writing, there is "minimal development of knowledge and understanding" (327).

In practice dialectic takes the form of a low-keyed but persistent questioning of the assumptions that underlie our student writers' ideas. The intention is to put developing writers in a position to examine the motives that lie just beyond their narratives, the recountings of the stories from their lives; to consciously reflect on things they take for granted, on the reasons for behaving as they do and seeing as they see; to move ever closer to an awareness of possible or alternate stances they might take: Who am I in this particular

paper? Why am I relating this as I am? The process of re-examination typically begins with the instructor modeling useful questions students might then ask of their own writing.

That one can deal with thinking and promote reflection through dialectical interaction and the writing process is to say nothing more than we as teachers can provide the conditions and direction required for our late adolescent and adult students to choose to develop in ways natural to them. What follows is, I believe, evidence of this. Here are samples of writing done early and late in an academic term by an adult, named Dorothy, who enrolled in our open-admissions University thirty years after graduating from high school. Her very first completed paragraph, submitted during week three of the term, makes clear her need for Basic Writing and the numerous problems she faces as an "outsider." Here her problems with the conventions of writing are only compounded by her mimicry of formal and academic-sounding language:

> My new experience in Junior High School appeared real, as opposed to elementary school because the subjects taught dealt with a life purpose that could confront a person in their every day existence even though reading, writing and arithmetic were still my main subjects, classes such as home economics where I was introduced to the art of cooking, I soon realized this was something real, and I would actuality cook a good part of my teenage and adult life; consequently, panic and anxiety attacked me, for my thoughts were I would be cooking meals three times a day every day for the rest of my life unless I was lucky enough to marry a chef; however, I like cooking and consider it a fine art.

The next paper, which appears below, was produced by the same writer during week twelve of a 15-week term. The assignment, "What I Like Most About Myself," is one that usually

surprises our students' "habitual thought patterns" since basic writers are not accustomed to "seeing" themselves in this light. Unfortunately, early drafting of most of the students resulted in "correct" but dead patterns of response, papers that seemed to have been written, as Janet Emig said it, "from one layer of the self--the ectoderm only, with student involvement in his thought and language moving down an unhappy scale from sporadic engagement to abject diffidence" (46). Since the members of the class, including Dorothy, by now had gained through daily writing and peer group response a measure of control over writing, enough at least to begin to feel confident in their abilities, I intervened directly and deliberately in their writing processes through dialogue and class discussion. (Actually, prior to this the students had already become accustomed to my persistent questioning: "There's that question again," they were fond of saying when I characteristically responded to their generalizations with "Why?") Our conversation--confrontation is more accurate--centered on the following questions I hoped would induce the students to re-examine their drafts from a more active, relativistic, and self-reflective perspective:

What is this trait I admire so?

How did I come to acquire it?

Is it familial or cultural in origin?

When and how is it demonstrated?

What are its advantages (i.e., how does it work in my favor)?

What are its disadvantages (i.e., how does it work against me)?

At any rate, here is the paper Dorothy handed in:

> What I like most about myself is how I handle situation forced on me in life. While most people do not want to die, I never wanted to be born. I told my mom she should have complained that she had a headache the night I was conceived. When I became aware of my existence in this huge mass called a world, I felt like I was dropped into something I was scared to death of. I wondered if I could find my place here, for all I saw was one big challenge after another. I started out competing with two older brothers, who maybe would have accepted another brother, but they did not want a sister getting in their way. This caused a lot of conflict, because I had to prove to them that a girl had just as much right in the household as they did. I believed in androgyny, (both masculine and feminine characteristics) and set out to prove a girl can do anything a boy could do and somethings better. For example, I could fight, play baseball, fix a bike and out run both of them, then finally they came around to accept me as an equal. Later going to school was another challenge, but it was easier because of the one's my brothers put on me gave me the ammunition I needed for school. I got really sick of proving one thing after another to people; I frowned on the fact of growing up and having to deal with adult challenges, such as getting married, having children and holding a job. Every one of these challenges reflected back to the first ones. Dealing with men I had to prove that women are also human. When playing a friendly game of chess with my husband, he always used the game for a tool to measure a man's ability to outthink a woman. If he won I was a dummy, so I had to beat him every game because my womenhood was on the line; therefore, he forced me to become an excellent chess player, and he finally stop playing chess with me altogether. I never could understand why a man thinks a women's mind was only good for holding an empty space in her head and that a man's mind was the only one capable of thinking and making decisions. On a job I had to prove that skin color had very little to do with a person ability to do a job well. I now care less about a challenge; as a mather of fact, I look forward to them. I realize the world is O.K. Its these people who make the problems. Since the world is such a beautiful place, I refuse to let people keep me from being happy here. Life, what a chess game. I now know how to keep people in checkmate, and this is what I mostly like about myself.

Though Dorothy's paper is not without problems, it does demonstrate through its strengths--a limited focus, specificity, and sense of structure; syntactic sophistication; and its self-consciousness or, in Bruner's terms, its awareness of having "a certain individuality"--sustained development and, I think, an emerging readiness for college.

The points I am making are (1) our objective in teaching basic writers ought to be to prepare them to participate in the academic culture, and (2) the best way of doing so is to focus our instruction on orienting them in a general sense at least to its practices, not only its use of language but also its habits of mind. These skills related to form and function are the basic ones on which our students' further instruction and their success so much depend. Though Dorothy as a developing writer may still be at risk--an astounding challenge lies ahead--she is now "in position."

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